



Marquis Childs Post 2-3-69

RFK's Missile Crisis Memoir Is Primer on Use of Restraint

WHEN GOOD MEN die their goodness does not perish but lives though they are gone.

That line from Euripides says something about one of the tragedies marking the ill-starred year of 1968. The assassination of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy in Los Angeles was a senseless act that left the Nation and the world so much the poorer. It threw a lurid light on the undercurrent of violence threatening to destroy the very structure of order and stability.

Kennedy at 43 had acquired his share of critics and enemies. Abrasive, often pugnacious, sometimes so withdrawn as to seem sullen or indifferent, as attorney general for three years he had been a sort of hatchet man for his brother, President John F. Kennedy. His ambition seemed to outrun both his experience and his capacity.

But, whatever his faults may have been, the legacy he has left of courage and wisdom is of incalculable value. An important part of that legacy is the book, "Thirteen Days," which Kennedy completed before his death. More than a memoir, more than simply another piece of history, it is a short, concise primer of how to steer a safe course through a terrible storm that promised from hour to hour to end with nuclear annihilation.

THE NEW PRESIDENT could not do better than keep a copy close at hand

should there be another nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union.

"Thirteen Days" is the story of the Cuban missile crisis of October, 1962, told by the member of the Ex Comm group who more than anyone except the President charted the course. Ex Comm was the committee within the National Security Council the members of which worked almost without ceasing through the 13 days and nights to force the Soviet Union to remove the missiles secretly placed in Cuba without precipitating a nuclear holocaust.

Because he was the president's brother he was naturally closer to him than any of the Ex Comm group. But the contribution he made during those incredibly tense days when the shadow of doom hovered over all mankind was far more than brotherly support. In the debate he argued throughout for a peaceful means, short of an attack on Cuba costing thousands of lives, to compel Premier Nikita Khrushchev to take out the missiles. He contended, with Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara as an ally, for flexibility, for giving Khrushchev a chance to back down without losing face.

THE LESSON, above all, in "Thirteen Days" is that the military invariably urges military action as a quick and simple remedy. And if their view is not countered by a free and thorough exchange with all the elements involved in a crisis, then this quick and simple remedy is likely to be resorted to.

"The discussion, for the most part, was able and organized," Kennedy wrote, "although, like all the meetings of this kind, certain statements were made as accepted truisms which I, at least, thought were of questionable validity. One member of the joint chiefs of staff, for example, argued that we could use nuclear weapons on the basis that our adversaries would use theirs against us in an attack. I thought, as I listened, of the many times that I had heard the military take positions which, if wrong, had the advantage that no one would be around at the end to know."

Kennedy was arguing for a blockade of Cuba that would stop Soviet ships carrying missile equipment and probably additional nuclear warheads. A blockade was ordered at the same time that troops, planes and guns were moved into place to act if the Soviets defied the blockade and tried to force their ships through. Exchanges with Khrushchev continued as the tension rose to an almost-intolerable level.

AFTER FIVE DAYS when the blockade seemed to have only limited effectiveness, the Joint Chiefs of Staff returned to the attack. They recommended an air strike on the next day to be followed up with an invasion, pointing out that they had always argued that a blockade would be far too weak a measure and that direct military action was the only move the Soviets would understand.

"We won't attack tomorrow," the President said. "We shall try again." This was the critical decision at a point when nerves were frayed to the breaking point and when the simple remedy of the military seemed the only way out even though it was certain to bring a reprisal and very probably nuclear war. When a Russian submarine was reported about to challenge the American blockaders with force Kennedy wrote:

"I think these few minutes were the time of greatest concern for the President. Was the world on the brink of a holocaust... his hand went up to his face and covered his mouth. He opened and closed his fist. His face seemed drawn, his eyes pained, almost gray. We stared at each other across the table. For a few fleeting seconds it was almost as though no one else was there and he was no longer the President."

It might have been. That is so frighteningly clear. It might have been if Robert Kennedy had not argued for patience and delay. That is the legacy putting us all immeasurably in his debt.